

Historical

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## EROS - THE LOCAL STORY

BY: David L. Stenseth  
Executive Vice President  
Sioux Falls Development Foundation

When Al Schock was selling Sioux Falls to Department of Interior people in Washington, D. C., he was asked what the area would do to show their interest in acquiring the EROS Data Center.

"Whatever is required, we will do it! We will give the land!" resounded the Sioux Falls Development Foundation President. Little did he or any other Sioux Falls community leader then know the ramifications of that statement.

Congressman Ben Reifel and Senator Karl Mundt were the first South Dakotans to hear and become enamored with the sound "EROS." While the project was first struggling through its shell, the two South Dakota congressional representatives sensed the economic impact of the center on their constituent areas. They discreetly relayed their knowledge and information to leading South Dakotans, hoping, if not knowing, that the local response would be overwhelming. It was. A concerted public relations effort was coordinated by the Sioux Falls Development Foundation, which touched almost every South Dakotan, from the average citizen to Governor Frank Farrar, and to liaison and represented officials in Washington, and finally to the President of the United States himself. The impossible dream of EROS was possible! Whatever was required was to be done.

Senator Karl Mundt was the keystone. In September of 1969 he announced, "I have received definite promise from the operating agency destined to handle this large new data receiving and processing center that Sioux Falls will be among the cities personally visited and evaluated by the site selection panel."



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Six months later, the then senior senator from South Dakota was in President Nixon's office asking for the release of the \$300,000 appropriation funding the site selection team. OMB (then Bureau of the Budget) released the funds, and Sioux Falls was given a great boost to being considered for the EROS Data Center.

Merlyn Veren, the Washington representative of the South Dakota Board of Regents and also of the Industrial Development and Expansion Agency, was very influential. He daily contacted federal officials who knew firsthand of the latest developments on the EROS project. One such individual was the influential Dr. William P. Pecora, Director of the Geological Survey, who served as Program Director of the Earth Resources Observation Satellite Program, and was later to become the Undersecretary of the Interior.

Back in Sioux Falls, the massive sales campaign assembled.

Ed Owen and Russ Pohl of Raven Industries, Pierce McDowell of Howalt Realty, Dick Devereaux of Northwestern Bell Telephone, Curtis Lovre of Northwestern National Bank, Don Westbee of the National Bank of South Dakota, and Lyle Fenstermaker of Cengas all joined to impress space contracting giants such as GE, RCA, IBM, and others that Sioux Falls was the proper home for EROS.

Sioux Falls Development Foundation President Al Schock and Vice President T. M. Reardon and Mayor M. E. Schirmer; along with Chamber of Commerce President Louis Warren, promoted Sioux Falls to anyone who would listen. Other zealots joined in speaking and writing about Sioux Falls' modern jet terminal, and that our best asset was our typically alert and vigorous people. They extolled the virtues of our climate, of our supportive industries, of our colleges, and of our environment.

Countless breakfasts, luncheons, and dinners were served over the talk of EROS. On May 21, 1970, for example, Mr. M. G. Stanton, Vice President of RCA's Astro-Electronics Division, spoke at a breakfast. He was sold on Sioux Falls.



People in Washington and in Sioux Falls finally began to believe that Sioux Falls was indeed the home for EROS. All the talk, all the trips to Washington, all the breakfasts, luncheons, and dinners, and all of the promises began to take hold. Sioux Falls was viable! Sioux Falls was attractive! Sioux Falls had everything! But Sioux Falls also had, or would have, that promised free land deed.

Finally the culmination came. On Tuesday, March 31, 1970, Senator Karl Mundt announced that Sioux Falls had been selected as the site for the Department of Interior's EROS Data Center.

In the Development Foundation's success, Al Schock, its President stated, "In preparing for this great development, Sioux Falls and South Dakota will have to assume many responsibilities. These will be of no small magnitude. As the chairman of the local Industrial and Development Foundation, I can report that...the membership and directors will be dedicated to doing everything possible and necessary in expediting the construction of this center."

He could not have been more correct. Many responsibilities were assumed, and they were of no small magnitude.

In order to acquire monies for the free land, the Sioux Falls Development Foundation spearheaded a massive fund raising campaign. A \$390,000 goal was tagged EROS "OPERATION GROUNDSHOT". \$150,000 was needed for the purchase of 300 acres of EROS land, \$120,000 for the purchase of land that would be used for a subsequent industrial park, and \$120,000 was to be used for the industrial park improvements.

Kick-off breakfasts and banquets featured key EROS speakers. On one such occasion, and setting the stage for the fund drive, Dr. William Pecora was met at the airplane with an unfurled red carpet. He spoke the next afternoon to a band of 446 excited, yet influential local citizens.

On June 18, 1970, Al Schock reported that the goal had been surpassed by \$72,000--with a total of \$462,000!



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At about the same time, three hundred acres of land had to be found. The land could not be bothered with the electronic noise of the 97,000 inhabitants of Minnehaha County and was to be ideally located within five to ten miles from the jet terminal in Sioux Falls. The soil had to be stable, and the supply of good quality water was a must.

By June 18, 1970, six alternate sites were discovered by a team consisting of Development Foundation Vice President T. M. Reardon, Realtor Tom Costello, Raven's Ed Owen, The Spitznagel Partners' Duane Paulson, and the ever-present Al Schock. With the technical expertise of the Stanford Research Institute, a site twelve miles north and four miles east of Sioux Falls was finally selected.

The half-section of farmland was owned by Rudy Froseth and Alfred Hegge. Hegge had lived on the farm most of his eighty-one years. His father homesteaded the land over 100 years ago. The patient diplomacy of Sioux Falls Realtor Joe Griffin finally brought the acquiescence of Hegge, who sighed, "You have a lot of memories after eighty-one years in one home."

But then came the public hearing for a two-mile buffer zone around the perimeter of the recently acquired farmland. Over 200 concerned farmers packed into the courthouse. They were worried about radio frequency interference suppressants installed on their machinery; they fretted over the possibility of land values dropping; and there were even intimations and accusations of the "mercenary intent" on the part of the Sioux Falls businessmen. Farmers' objections were overcome largely by EROS's Glenn Landis, and on August 25, 1971, the zoning was approved.

Bill Schmidt, special assistant to the Director of USGS, was the first to discuss arrangements of the actual financing and construction of the Data Center. Sioux Falls attorney Russ Greenfield, representing the S.F.D.F. and "Schmitty" agreed on a structure and financing arrangement to allow the Foundation to build and own the \$5 million dollar facility and lease it back to the federal government. Thousands of hours were spent in the Development Foundation offices writing and searching financial, legal, and construction documents. Largely because of extensive technicalities, this was perhaps the most detailed, the most precise, and many times the most frustrating aspect of the Development Foundation's involvement in EROS.



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South Dakota was inching its way into Spring. The farmlands of the Hegge's and of the Froseth's were as yet unchanged. The prairie grasslands began their perennial struggle through the thawing rich soil. But soon, a modern facility would be generating photographs from space where 100 years ago Hegge's father had painstakingly tilled the soil with a mule drawn earthen plow. Such a plow was appropriately selected to be used for the EROS groundbreaking.

April 14, 1971, broke with an unnerving chill. The South Dakota winter was not yet leashed. Preceded by a packed banquet the evening before, the groundbreaking ceremony had to be moved into a back-up fairgrounds tent. Development Foundation officials, mayors, dignitaries, federal officials, a governor and a senator spoke before the huddled audience of 800 localites; many of whom previously had been protesting the zoning changes. The side of the tent was lifted and Dr. William Pecora and Al Schock were the first to grasp the aged and splintered handles of the South Dakota plow. The mules brayed; the plow lurched forward--the ground was broken!

Earl Lund, who had just completed work on the Kennedy Center, was hired by the S.F.D.F. as the EROS Construction Manager. Lueder Construction, based in Omaha, Nebraska, was the general contractor. The building went up expertly, and it was completed on time.

Dedication ceremonies were held on August 6 and 7, 1973. With national network cameras running, Interior Secretary Rogers E. Morton addressed the excited, and yes, proud citizens. The Secretary designated the Data center building as the KARL E. MUNDT FEDERAL BUILDING.

